



Christoph Türcke

Blasphemy

On the structure of mass insult

Historically, the rationalist critique of religion needed the means of mockery if it was not to become toothless, writes Christoph Türcke. But mockery was and is only rational when used as a weapon against power and oppression. It was the perception of the Mohammed cartoons as the West's victorious mockery that so incensed the Islamic world. "It makes a crucial difference who caricatures the prophet — whether it is a Muslim or a non-Muslim Westerner. That is not to employ double standards [...] Rationalism that wants more than simply to be right must learn to judge where its mockery begins to take on a triumphalist tone, one that insults the humiliated rather than unmasks pretensions."

Christ on the cross with gas mask and dice-shaker; the horizontal beam of the cross is broken at both ends; Christ's freed left hand holds up a small cross; underneath, the caption: "Shut your mouth and keep serving". In 1928, this small drawing famously earned George Grosz a charge of blasphemy. "Blasphemy" literally means "slander". What is usually meant, however, is its most serious manifestation: the slander of the rituals and convictions considered by a community to be inviolable. "Mockery of religion" is the usual definition, therefore. But was Grosz really mocking Christianity?

One needs only to browse the theological literature on world war. "Christianity is service in war, where the sacrifice of life itself must not be refused. Christ came to drive Satan — 'the emperor of this world' — from his kingdom." "Death on the battlefield can [...] be a part of the total glory and the worthiness of a martyr." "The brave must persevere and not despair." This is how in 1915 the German Jesuit Christian Pesch interpreted the verse from the Bible, "He that endureth to the end shall be saved" (Mathew 10:22).¹ They could just as well have been the words of a Protestant or a Frenchman. The theology of war at that time was ecumenical and international — unanimous enough to promote death on the battlefield and rally the Western Christian nations to reciprocal mass slaughter — in the name of a God which together they invoked for protection.

Grosz's controversial drawing is a seismograph of the First World War. *That* was what had given a modern Christ a gas mask and dice-shaker; Grosz had merely captured the act in an image. The way Christ is nailed to the cross, how with his left hand he extends a small cross into the void, as if calling on invisible presences there to remove the mask from his face, gives back to the cross he is nailed to something of its authentic character as instrument of torture and execution — a meaning that, when it stands as a symbol on the altar, or when the minister crosses himself, it lost long ago. To proclaim a crucified man a divine saviour, to talk of the Roman Empire's preferred means of execution in the same breath as the God of Israel: that was the real monstrosity of early Christianity, "Unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto

the Greeks foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:23) in the words of Paul, who famously condemned as blasphemy the message of the crucifixion's power of salvation before becoming one of its foremost apostles.

Christianity originated under suspicion of blasphemy; for that reason it was persecuted and driven into the missions; it proclaimed the martyred, human Jesus to be the mirror image of God, who would very soon end all martyrdom — but who still has not arrived. Instead of the Kingdom of God came the Church, which despite persecution spread throughout the Mediterranean region and was promoted to "state religion" by the Roman Empire shortly before it collapsed.

In the course of this success story, the cross transmuted from symbol of martyred humanity to symbol of triumph. "You will be victorious under this sign", a voice in a dream supposedly said to Constantine before the battle against his imperial rivals. The scandalous message of the cross was thereby equally scandalously reappraised. Grosz found a pictorial language for this to suit the times. The gas mask as symbol of world war as well as the device that doesn't even allow Him to cry out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46), but instead the laconic caption, "Shut your mouth and keep serving": that's more like twentieth-century theology than blasphemy.

And what if many contemporaries nonetheless refused to see anything in it except plain insult to their religious feelings? Then it shows what a murky region religious feelings are. They don't fall clear and pure from heaven but are the product of a long and complex process of development. At their origin is the terror of nature that must have pervaded the nervous constitution of the inhabitants of the late Stone Age so deeply that they developed their own strategy to deal with it: the repetition of the terror. No human culture exists at whose beginnings the cult of sacrifice did not feature, and it wasn't frogs or snails that were being sacrificed either, but the most precious things of all: people and large animals. The collective re-enacted upon select individuals the traumatic power of nature that afflicted it, in order to gradually deprive the terrifying of its terror by constantly repeating it.

The sacrificial ritual proceeds according to the logic of the compulsive repetition of trauma. Tens of thousands of years may have passed by the time the first diffuse and impulsive repetitions had become ritual sacrifice; by the time the higher powers of protection these sacrifices were supposedly offered up to had taken shape as totems, ancestors, or gods; and finally, by the time the idea of such powers had taken hold in the emotional constitution of a collective, so that these were felt to be the one and all, the sole source of sacredness and identity. For a modern sense of time, however, an almost inconceivably long process of discipline and sublimation is necessary for rituals, cults, and items of faith to be felt so natural that it were as if humanity had been meant for them all along.

How, then, could Christianity have reached the point where believers knew nothing else than to kneel down before the altar, to cross themselves at the mention of the Holy Trinity or the Virgin Mary, and to shudder with awe when taking communion? Fine words alone? Or just as much because those less willing to make such reactions second nature were made terrifying examples of? These days, many believers no longer consider the Inquisition to have been true Christianity. However, its contribution to the internalization of a faith that no longer likes to remember it is incalculable. The instructive sight of burning heretics played every bit as much a part in Christian teaching on awe and

glorification as charity and edifying sermons.

As Rudolf Otto [German Protestant theologian, 1869–1937 — trans.] demonstrated, the so-called "sacred" is by no means primarily the good or the moral, but what appears vast and almighty. Its attributes are fear and trembling. They form the basis of religious feeling. Awe and respect are its high-cultural manifestations, speechless rapture its outermost varnish. Religious feelings cover a whole register: from the darkest sacrificial shudder to the tender heights of mysticism. And, strictly speaking, they are a misunderstanding. Feelings as such can be embarrassing or pleasant, dull or sharp, uplifting or depressing, strong or weak, but not religious or profane. There are only feelings that those they affect feel to be so pervading, moving, uplifting, or pleasurable, so far removed from their usual range of emotions, that they draw the following conclusion: something that special can't just be a profane experience, I must have been touched by God, the sacred, the boundless itself. Thus what is actually felt is already interpreted as religious. So-called religious feelings are feelings already given grand interpretations, a fact which is then forgotten.

It is precisely because there is no such thing as religious feelings in themselves that what they are interpreted as is so vulnerable. It has always belonged to the psychological and military aspects of the strategy of war to destroy the enemy's holy relics and mock their rituals. Thus seen, blasphemy is ancient; it belongs to the magic arts of war. In modernity, all that has changed is that a new aspect has entered in order to mock other religions: that of religion as such. That might seem like a minor additional nuance. In factual terms it's a semantic upheaval, however.

Insulting religion as such: initially, that couldn't be triumphalist, done from outside, but subversive, done from inside. It started in the seventeenth century. An article on "The three traitors", namely Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, did the rounds in Europe, anonymously and secretly, of course. Woe betide the publisher or reader who made themselves known. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, a French rural minister called Jean Meslier, who obediently conducted mass in his village all his life, left behind a testament in which he mercilessly applied the Cartesian test of truth to the Bible, which he literally picked to pieces, declaring it absurd to honour as the apotheosis of truth a piece of writing so full of contradictions. The Bible, so he concluded, was not the slightest bit better than Greek mythology. All higher beings are lies.

Since then, blasphemy has had the image of a nihilist phantom. A blasphemer can only be someone for whom nothing is sacred. This is of course mistaken. One only has to open the Book of Job: "For the arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinketh up my spirit: the terrors of God do set themselves in array against me" (6:4). Job curses the day he was born, rather like the Islamic mystic Farid ad-Din Attar in his *Book of Suffering*: "Yes, take it back, this life you have given me, I want it not."² Or, particularly delicately, Heinrich Heine, who wanted to leave heaven "to the angels and the sparrows", however, changed his mind in the agony of fatal illness. On 2 February 1850 he wrote to Heinrich Laube: "Praise God that I once again have a God; now, when the pain gets too much, I can allow myself a profanity or two; the atheist is not granted such relief."

Though there's no doubt these are clear blasphemies, they are committed in the way one curses a lover whom more than anything one wants to have back. Something of the disappointed lover can also be found in the sarcasm of the

radical rationalists who discard the teachings of Christianity having measured them against their own truth claims. That nothing is sacred to the blasphemer does not even apply to the Marquis de Sade, a virtuoso in linking the Holy Trinity to every conceivable obscenity. He preached the cult of the rigorous maximization of desire, to which end every religion, social etiquette, custom, yes every scruple was to be sacrificed. The cult of desire allows everything to be ridiculed pitilessly but cannot tolerate ridicule of itself. The Sadean orgies of sex and violence seem far more to be the clinging to of a final certainty. "O my friend, let us have the orgasm together, that is life's only pleasure", cries one of the protagonists in the throes of sexual passion, thus letting on that, once compulsory, pleasure is no longer pleasure. Sade, the high priest of pleasure, is not so unlike his Christian counterparts. His longing for enjoyment without conscience is the flipside of the Christian longing for grace without the pangs of guilt. The more cynical Sade is, the more he exposes the cynicism of a religion that, in the name of eternal pleasure and grace *after* death, brands pleasure *before* death the enemy of grace. Sade is a radical anti-humanist — to the point of radically enlightened humanity. In his blasphemy extremes collide.

Certainly, blasphemy is not simply the same as enlightenment. However, enlightenment sometimes resembles blasphemy so closely it can be confused for it. When it hits the bull's-eye, mockery is the most piercing form of criticism. Where factual arguments fail, a single joke, satire, or caricature succeeds in exposing vague, pompous, arrogant authority. Mockery is cynical where it *makes* what is sad ridiculous. It is enlightening where it suddenly reveals what is ridiculous, if necessary disfiguring it so that it becomes recognizable. Criticism without mockery is toothless, does not really stick, is not meant wholly seriously. For this reason, rationalist critique of religion, if it was to be serious, could not help but occasionally insulting religious authority and the sentiments it bred. Occasional ridicule added impetus to its attack.

When Christianity was still big and strong and foisted itself upon all members of society as the sole route to salvation, ridiculing religion meant opposing the highest truth. To do so was to exclude oneself from Christianity, if not from the basic conventions of sanity. No one in their right mind could want that. On the other hand, in liberal society, which was based on religious freedom, the offence of blasphemy lost its traditional form. Because religious truth was no longer assigned exclusively to any one faith, it was not that which was thought worth protecting, but religious feeling itself, without regard for its content. Article 166 of the German legal code explicitly proscribes "causing insult to faiths, religious communities, and groups of people sharing the same view of the world", "if it disturbs the general peace". In a society that makes every person's religious belief their own business, blasphemy is considered an objective offence; nevertheless, its criterion is whether someone feels insulted, in other words, it is purely subjective.

"Subjective" means here something rather different from merely "private". So-called "religious feeling" must have attained what Kant would have called a certain "subjective universality". The women's shoe treated by some neurotic as a fetish object is not to be protected, though a scrap of material widely thought to be a relic is; not the ritual meticulousness and devotion of the cleaning rituals of a mysophobic, but that exercised during Friday prayers. The law does not state how a group obtains the status of religious community or "group of people sharing the same view of the world". It recognizes any religious feeling that has reached the status of "subjective universality" to the same extent. It makes no distinction between the wounded dignity of the

humiliated and insulted and the wounded vanity of the prima donna. As long as it doesn't touch on its foundational principles, the pluralist market society protects any old mumbo jumbo that, as "world view", has managed to form a congregation and attract religious belief. In the realm of competing religious feelings, none should feel hard done by.

Anyone who considers blasphemous this system of competition itself — the "market of possibilities" in which religious and faith communities place themselves, seeking to improve their image with costly advertising campaigns — will find no hearing before a judge. As with any other product, how is one to disseminate a religious message other than by advertising? It is overlooked that treating the sacred as a product might conceal an immense blasphemy, namely a form of prostitution. For example, to call religious leaders "pimps for Christianity" because they commissioned media-savvy advertisers to promote a faith using techniques proven successful in selling cars and computers would earn a person a charge of blasphemy. But the mockery of religion that *they* feel insulted by is not even envisaged in the legal code.

The blasphemy law is modern, because it conforms to the market; it is archaic, because it conceals under the cloak of religious neutrality fundamental respect for an undefined sacred entity. In both respects it is anti-rationalist. But it has another side. It provides shelter not only for obscurantism and injured vanity, but also the humiliated and insulted, who attract mockery because they are the losers. In this sense, it is able to hold a mirror up to rationality: it can teach it to recognize its own human content.

Rationality cannot be serious without mockery and ridicule. But mockery and ridicule were only ever rational where they emerged from oppression, where weakness used them as a weapon against the mighty, which had at its disposal less wit but more brute force. Of course, mockery and ridicule are there to be victorious in the end; but where the object of ridicule does not disappear along with victory, where mockery and ridicule constitute the victor's cry of triumph, they are repulsive. The Nazi's mockery of Judaism was the stupid, racist resentment towards a religion whose intellectual achievements today sustain critical thinking more than it usually cares to admit. When Europeans make fun of Amazonian ancestral cults, they are bragging about how much progress has been made, vacuously celebrating the victory of colonialism in retrospect. Moreover, such victory poses are not enlightening when it really is superstition that they are mocking. It's not at all certain how enlightening it would be to tell the poor wretches in the favelas of São Paulo, Mexico, or Recife that the pentacostal religion they desperately cling to for want of anything but children and hunger is a load of nonsense. At any rate, situations exist when the dignity of the suffering should be respected, when, because every attempt to enlighten has the bad taste of the arrogance of the privileged, one should keep silent.

Having said that, in the last decade a global line of conflict has grown up where keeping silent doesn't help. It made its first lurid appearance when the Ayatollah Khomeini announced a *fatwah* on Salman Rushdie — an apostate who insulted Islam, so it was said. Now insult by non-believers is being discussed. A Danish newspaper published caricatures of Mohammed. Others reprinted them. In the Islamic world it triggered off outrage, desire for revenge, attacks on Western institutions, necessitating a reassessment of the boundaries between blasphemy, the freedom of the press, and the freedom of religion. In order to do so, it is best first to take a bird's-eye view of the political weather map in which this situation brewed.

"The West": a symbol for those countries from which globalization emerged before it was called that. Its first act was the conquering of large parts of America, Africa, and Asia, including plenty of genocide and plundering of natural resources. It was the import of gold and silver, cotton and sugar, coffee, rubber, and oil from these countries that created the material means for "the West" to become what it is: the region in which the liberal capitalist social order was founded. Meanwhile, its economic system has conquered the world. Wherever it went it dissolved pre-modern structures and laid down its own imperatives. The world market is not the result of democracy but of military victories and economic forces; without this basis, human rights such as freedom of expression, of the press, of religion, of occupation, the choice of governmental representatives would never have got a chance.

The same goes for Muslim countries. Of all the non-Western cultures, the Islamic one has a special status: it is precariously close to the West — not only geographically. On one hand, Islam is the third of the three monotheistic religions; of course the definitive one, as it believes, but with high regard for the other two, above all the Old Testament, honouring Abraham as the founding father of all three religions and even having a certain respect for Jesus as a forerunner of Mohammed. On the other hand, it is for this very reason that Islam has been Christianity's keenest rival for a good thousand years. And in one respect Islam is strictly different from Christianity and Judaism. The latter pair started out small: the Jews as subalterns, a tribe that were lucky to escape the mighty Egyptians; the Christians as a persecuted, powerless minority. Islam, on the other hand, has been victorious from the moment it entered the world. Mohammed was as much a clever strategist as he was a charismatic visionary. He returned from Medina to his native city of Mecca as a prophet *and* as general. He knew how to capture the city both militarily and psychologically. That was both his special personal ability and his legacy to his descendents, the Caliphates. The victory of Islam was considered inseparable from military and political victories. Moreover, Islam's victories appeared to validate it. Six years after the death of Mohammed, Islam conquered Jerusalem; exactly one hundred years after his death, Islamic troops were in southern France.

That's not to say that Islam is at heart belligerent and Christianity peaceful. For example, the degree of tolerance that Jews and Christians received under the Caliphate in the Middle Ages was never matched by Christian leaders towards Muslims. The Inquisition was a Christian invention. Islam never had a need for a planned system of mass spiritual surveillance underpinned by torture. It tended towards more benevolent domination. But domination it had to be. The Islamic sense of self is so bound up with victory that more than other religions it becomes difficult to distinguish between political defeats and religious insults. And now a force that comes from the West — of all places — and, as the spawn of Christianity to a certain extent, has penetrated the Islamic World, going about abstractly like a nihilistic phantom but possessing the concrete power to overturn all conditions of life. Not only has it defeated the armies of Allah outwardly; it invades, with an inconceivable force, in a godlike-godless way, the inner regions of Allah's faithful.

This power is the global capitalist economy. Its rules have entered the everyday constitutions of even the strictest Muslims, not only economically but also spiritually. This explains the range of bizarrely ambiguous reactions: Mullahs who are anti "the West" but pro the micro-electronic communications devices that can so effectively be used against it; youths who are pro Nike and Coca Cola but anti America; veiled women behind the wheels of smart cars

and in the upper echelons of big companies; and many less obvious examples, people who more or less conform to Western ways of life without being able to decide whether they should consider them their own or as something grafted onto them.

The Islamic world is everything but one homogenous bloc; and therefore there were very different reactions to the Mohammed cartoons. In Morocco and Libya there were no public demonstrations. Those in the Gulf States proceeded relatively restrainedly. On the other hand, demonstrations in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Somalia, Kashmir, Indonesia, and Afghanistan were explosive. Wherever political or religious leaders appealed to the population to take exception to the insult to the Prophet there were collective outbursts of rage, destroyed property, deaths, and injuries. The anger was of course turned on for the occasion: mass hysteria in the true sense of the term. Hysteria, as Freud showed, is suffering transferred onto something else. Hysterical revulsion is not aimed at the food that seems to have initiated it; hysterical paralysis does not come from trapped nerves. The symptom of suffering is a decoy. Nevertheless, the suffering is experienced to be real and is painful precisely because its real causes cannot be revealed.

And so it is in this case. It is questionable whether the majority of those who furiously swore revenge for the insult to the prophet and invoked death to Denmark, Europe, and America had even seen the caricatures or had a clue where Denmark is. And even if they had, their anger was utterly disproportionate. Its true cause lay not in the caricatures, which were merely a trigger. From here it's easy to see why in some countries the anger of the population is stoked deliberately. The rulers have a vested interest in diverting the resentment created by their authoritarian regimes and their disinterest in the well-being of their people: towards foreign caricaturists and the governments that protect them, for example. But it would be hasty to conclude that the caricatures were merely religious lightning rods for local political tensions. That would be to think in Western terms. In the Muslim understanding of the self, religion and politics can't be separated in such a way.

Moreover, hysteria has two sides. The decoy symptom of suffering is different from the real causes; however, it must have certain similarities with it, otherwise it could not assume the role of decoy. Therefore, to feel offended by the Mohammed cartoons in one's identity as a Muslim does not indicate suffering under policies that deny human rights, jobs, or food. On the contrary, one does feel genuinely offended as a Muslim — but by something much more serious than a caricature, namely the victory of the West's top export: the capitalist economy and its democratic framework. The more one participates in this Western export, the more one practices Western ways of life and ignores the challenge they pose to the Koran, the Sharia, and the Islamic pretence of supremacy, the less one can admit to this victory. All this was abruptly revealed by the Mohammed cartoons. In themselves they are trifling, and Arabic countries, where spiteful representations of Jews, portraying them in Nazi uniform for example, can be found regularly in the press, have little right to get worked up about them artificially.

The difficult thing about the Mohammed cartoons is that Westerners have done something that Muslims would never do, no matter how distanced they are towards the Prophet otherwise. With a few strokes of the pen they have once again suddenly revealed the entire victory of the West. It is the victor's mockery that has so deeply offended Muslims — including many liberal Muslims who unequivocally rejected mass hysteria as a reaction. Meanwhile,

the subtext accompanying the statements of the few liberals who joined the chorus "Death to the West" was always "Death to the West in our own souls". The Mohammed caricatures have awakened the guilty feeling that one is no longer as immune to the West as one should be. The hatred of the West is largely externalized self-hatred.

The Mohammed caricatures are the mockery of the victor: imperial rather than subversive. They should have remained submerged. But a criminal offence they are not. In almost every European country there are the beginnings of Muslim parallel communities that, protected by laws on religious freedom, build up militant Islamic cells and above all enviously guard that their women and girls do not defect from their strictly patriarchal group. Women who have succeeded in doing so are today the most convinced proponents of a critique of Islam that makes use of the means of caricature and satire, and who, like Shabana Rehman, a Norwegian cabaret artist of Pakistani descent, even risk death threats. It is hard to count those who make such threats as the "humiliated" deserving of protection from further offences. Alternatively, if one is generous, the cartoons can be read as an ill-judged show of solidarity with those who receive such death threats.

Nevertheless, it makes a crucial difference who caricatures the prophet — whether it is a Muslim or a non-Muslim Westerner. That is not to employ double standards. Criticism of the spuriousness and rigidity of the Christian faith that has proven to be correct will not be wrong if applied to Islam. However, rationalism that wants more than simply to be right must learn to judge where its mockery begins to take on a triumphalist tone, one that insults the humiliated rather than unmask pretensions — and where it reveals itself when it takes such subtleties into account. New laws will not help matters. No law on press freedom will ever be able to define satisfactorily what is crucial: the point at which mocking subversion turns into triumphalist mockery.

Here, only improved, context-based judgement will be of help. Blasphemy in itself attests to little. What matters is the concrete situation: who is mocking which religion? Who feels offended and why? In the 1960s, many in the West considered the offence of blasphemy an anachronism. Today, it is one of the few things still able to mobilize people en masse. For mild-mannered Europeans, the gathering of hundreds of thousands of people incensed by the Mohammed cartoons was not only appalling — it also had something fascinating. There are still people who hold their basic convictions so deeply that they will fight for them tooth and nail. Do they not have a certainty, an inner focus, that we lost long ago? That is the appeal of fundamentalism, not only Islamic: a fixed structure of meaning, strong, identity-providing religious feelings. The blasphemy law protects them across the board, however murky and crazy they might be. That is its dark side. However, little would be gained in abolishing it: its objection to the cynical triumph of the victor would also be removed.

¹ Cited by Karl Hammer, *Deutsche Kriegstheologie*, Munich: Kösel 1974.

² Cited in Navid Kermani, *Der Schrecken Gottes*, Munich: Beck 2005.

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